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Merry Christmas.

To Ed

from

Aunt Emily.

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"'I'VE COME BACK FOR THE LETTER.'"

HARUM-SCARUM JOE

BY

WILLIAM ALLEN DROMGOOLE

AUTHOR OF "THE VALLEY PATH," "THE HEART OF OLD HICKORY," ETC.

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* Mrs. Florence Dickson, May N. 1911

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HARUM-SCARUM JOE.

CHAPTER I.

UNFAVORABLE SIGNS.

GRANNY DUFFY paused in her soap-making, looked severely at her grandson, Joe Hickey, and remarked:

"Jim Tate says you ain't got no business runnin' off to Lone Mountain when you have got a stiddy job in his gris'-mill. 'Spech'ly when Jerry Tate air willin' to take you into his saw-mill if you ain't satisfied with 't'other. You better listen to Jim and Jerry. They was always good friends of you-uns. It's a long ways to Lone Mountain anyhows."

Joe Hickey ignored her reference to his employers and friends, the two Tates. Against the counsel of all who cared for him, except his sister Delia, he had determined to leave his job and "seek his fortune." The headstrong young fellow was now seeking sympathy and not advice from his grandmother.

"I can walk to Jerry Tate's by ten tonight, barrin' o' accidents," he said. "If I leave there by daylight tomorrer, I can get to the Lone 'gainst dark, barrin' of bad luck an' accidents."

"But boys oughtn't to be trompin' over the country after night. It's a bad sign, an' it's a worse one when they air so restless to git away from home anyhows. If you *air* turned twenty, you ain't no Solerman, as I have been able to make out."

Joe leaned upon the low fence before Granny Duffy's cabin door, and once more explained his reasons for going forth.

He was tired of Powell's Valley and the monotony of its quiet life. There were rumors of a railway soon to be built to Lone Mountain. The Hickey kinfolk, his father's people, lived there. By joining them before the incoming of the railway, he should "grow up with the country," he declared.

Delia had at last consented to his scheme; this was a decisive argument with Joe.

The lonely little cabin before which Joe stood was just in the shadow of the great ridge which forms the division wall between the pretty valleys of the Clinch and Powell's rivers. Joe, as he gazed at the cabin, his grandmother, and the familiar scene, felt that he should miss the old place and the old woman when far away. He hated to go with his grandmother's objections quite unsubdued, and he lingered in the hope that she might soften and bless him on his way.

Joe slipped his rifle, his sole baggage, through his

hands until the stock rested upon the ground. He held one brown palm over the muzzle while he mopped the drops of perspiration from his cheeks and his rather sharp nose. The weather was warm, even for the season, which was early May.

"It's a toler'ble hard tramp," said Joe, hoping to arouse sympathy, "but I 'low I can make it. An' it'll be daylight 'ginst I start tomorrer, if the sun shines."

"Joe Hickey"—the old woman ceased for a moment pounding the ashes in the hopper. "Where do you reckin I were raised," she went on, "not to know it's daylight when the sun rises? I've been watchin' this here sun for sixty-nine year an' better. When it tetches the top rail o' the fence it air six o'clock this time o' year. When it gits to the poach it air ten. An' when it comes smack across the doorsill, it air twelve. It were there when yer grandad died. The coffin made a long, black shadder as they fetched it 'cross the doorway. Don't tell me I don't know sun time in *this* country!"

Joe sought another subject.

"Ain't you late about makin' of yer soap?" he asked.

"Some late. First Monday after March moon air the best time. Our last were no 'count, owin' to Dely's stirrin' of the wrong way. It air as bad to stir soap backwards as it air to make it in the dark o' the moon. Will you meet Bill Nichols on yer way, Joe?"

A frown instantly darkened the careless, open face

of the young mountaineer. He was at feud with Bill Nichols, who carried the mail along the Lone Mountain Route.

"If I meets him," said Joe, "he'd better keep to one side, for I've got a gun this time."

"It was Bill that had the gun the day he marched you before him down to Sneedville for disturbin' o' meetin' down to Panther Creek," said the old woman imprudently.

"I'll settle that with Bill Nichols if we meets today," cried Joe.

"I tell you, Joe," said his grandmother, "you ought to quit that grudge ye air holdin' aginst Bill. You did create a disturbmint at Panther Creek — you know you did. An' plenty have heard of you a-threatenin' Bill. If Bill were to git hold of it, he'd jist edzactly fight it out o' you, that's what he'd do."

"An' what would I be doin' of all that time?" demanded Joe. "See here, Granny!"

He thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a handful of bullets, slightly oblong and misshapen.

"I molded 'em down to Pete Pennybaker's shop last night. I'm aimin' to shoot a deer on the Lone Route, or may do worse. That's a mighty lonesome route. Old Mobry's sendin' a lot o' money in the mail today, for to buy new goods down to Knoxville. I heard that down to the store, so I fixed up for robbers, or varmints, or anything."

"You better fix that tongue o' yours, Joe," said Granny, "afore it wags you into some trouble or other."

"I ware sayin'," said Joe, "as I fixed for varmints; but if that upstart, Bill Nichols, comes along an' provokes me or tackles me, I sh'd hate fer to have to say what mayn't happen."

"Laws a-massy, child!" exclaimed the old woman. "You upset me to that pass, I mighty nigh forgot what it ware Dely told me to say to you. I *have* forgot— It ware somethin'—"

"Ain't Dely round?" cried Joe, looking around uneasily. "I allowed she'd stay home today, knowin' I was goin' by."

Granny Duffy dropped her chin in her palm to think what the message was, while Joe waited impatiently.

Nothing on earth was so precious as Delia Hickey in her brother Joe's eyes. Since, after their parents' death, Joe had begun to work at Tate's mill on the Clinch, and Delia had gone to live with her grandmother, the orphans had seen little of each other.

But Joe none the less worshipped the fair-haired little girl who had so often followed him through the woods, helped him with chores about the house, and given him love and confidence always.

Should he ever return from Lone Mountain to his old home, it would be, as he said, "for Dely and old Tige," the veteran dog that had long accompanied the brother and sister in their rambles.

Tige had been lying down, blinking affectionately at the young mountaineer while he discussed his journey with Granny Duffy. At the mention of Delia's

name, the old dog rose and thrust his muzzle into Joe's caressing hand.

"Did Dely want me to fetch her somethin' when I come back?" Joe asked, hoping to assist his grandmother's memory.

"No," she said. "I were to call her when you-uns came by. She's aimin' to send a letter by you to Bill Nichols."

"What air Dely writin' to Bill Nichols for?" he asked angrily. "And him plottin' to have me marched up to Sneedville court-house before another shot-gun."

"You better ax her," responded the old woman. "She air full-grown, turned seventeen, goin' on eighteen, an' have full power of her tongue an' hearin'. You better ax her what she's writin' to Bill Nichols."

As if she really intended he should act upon the suggestion, she stepped to the rear of the cabin, and called:

"Dely! De——ly!"

The girl looked up from her gardening at the sound of her grandmother's voice, saw the old woman beckoning, and at once started toward the cabin.

In her eagerness to see her brother, she forgot that she carried her hoe. The nearest way to him lay in a direct route through the cabin, and through it she went. When she came out at the other door, her grandmother raised a shrill cry of alarm.

"Lor, Dely! Ain't you got no more sense than to fetch a hoe in the house? The very worst luck in the world. There's sure to be a death in the family!"

"I ain't believin' in signs," she said calmly. At the same time she carried the hoe obediently to the rear of the house, and left it there.

"Dely air onruly," said the old woman, "an' it all comes o' the book-larnin' she larnt o' the parson's wife last spring. You've got to watch the signs, child. Didn't Pete Pennybaker keep his hoe in the house 'count o' it bein' more handy? An didn't his wife literally fall away an' die, leavin' a fitified son for Pete to keer for? It were all on account o' the hoe bein' kept in the house."

Delia smiled. "I allow that's so," she said. "The luck might 'a' been better if Pete had a kept his hoe in the garden, usin' it in raisin' somethin' for his wife to eat stid o' starvin' of her as all the mount'n knows he done."

Joe laughed aloud.

"That's the truth," he declared.

"An' it's the truth that you ware findin' fault o' Dely for writin' to Bill Nichols, a bit ago, if I rickollicts proper. Deny that if you can, Joe Hickey!" said Granny angrily.

"I ain't denyin' nothin'," said Joe. "An' I ain't goin' to fetch no letters to Bill Nichols, Dely."

She came and leaned upon the fence beside him, so near that her fair hair brushed his shoulder when she pushed her bonnet back. She laid her hand upon his breast, and spoke to him in the quiet, loving way that he had known from none but her.

"Yes, you will, Joe," she said. "You ain't goin' to

not do the very last thing I ask you to do." The tears sprang into her eyes as she repeated, "The last thing! O Joe, how will I do without you?"

Instantly his manner softened. They began to talk affectionately about his plans. Bill Nichols was, for the moment, forgotten.

The old woman, who had returned to the ash-hopper, paid no more heed to them. It did not please her to see quiet, steady Delia whispering affection into the ear of the careless, happy-go-lucky, reckless brother, who was gently stroking the mass of golden hair so near his shoulder.

Granny Duffy resented Joe's indifference to her counsels and warnings. It was well known throughout the valley that harum-scarum Joe acknowledged but one adviser, and that was Delia, who supported her brother's disbelief in the ancient signs and superstitions of the mountain folk.

"Now don't you be frettin', Dely," Joe was saying. "I'm goin' to make a fortune down there, an' come back for you-uns some day. But I ain't goin' to fetch no letters to Bill Nichols."

"It ain't nothin' to hurt," Delia told him. "It's just — business."

"What business you got writin' to Bill Nichols? He's my enemy, Bill air. I'd shoot him tomorrer if he were to provoke me. Plenty have heard me say so."

Delia knew the threat was only boy's talk, but she knew that it was very foolish boy's talk, and was sorry that anyone should have heard it.

"You ware in the wrong, Joe," she said. "You know you did disturb the meetin' an' Bill ware appointed to arrest you."

"You sidin' against me too, air you?" said Joe. "An' writin' about it to him? No, I won't tetch no sech letters — not with my foot! I'd die first. 'Tain't reasonable of you, Dely, to ask it."

The face of the girl grew stern. With no other explanation she turned back to her hoe, saying merely, "You can let it be. It ain't no matter." She did not look up, lest her brother should see the tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

Joe had gone on, and Delia was hard at work when a shadow fell across the garden spot. Delia looked up and saw her brother.

"Did you forgit somethin', Joe?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, Dely," said Joe, "I forgot my manners, an' I've come back for the letter. For you, Dely, I'll take it."

Delia handed him the letter, and he put it in his pocket. She kissed him affectionately, and he went on again.

As he passed by the hopper, his grandmother called to him:

"Did you make a cross mark, Joe, when you turned back? It's mighty bad luck to turn back. Air you sure you made a cross?"

"I made it," he nodded, and the old lady returned to her lye.

"But I do wish," she said to the gray ashes when

Joe was gone, "I do wish Dely hadn't fetched that hoe in the house. I shouldn't wonder if Joe were killed 'fore he ever gits back. There's mighty bad blood 'twixt him an' Bill Nichols, an' the signs have all been aginst Joe today."

Poor Joe tramped on, unconscious of impending evil.

CHAPTER II.

BAD NEWS FROM THE FORD.

THE sun had reached the last time mark on Granny Duffy's floor. The task at the hopper had been completed; the lye was dripping steadily. The garden had been carefully weeded, too, and the two women stood for a moment together under the low eaves, watching the vanishing sunlight.

"Dely," said the old woman, "you better go over to Pete Pennybaker's an' borrer that mare o' his'n for tomorrer. You-uns 'll have to go to mill afore Sunday, an' this air Friday. Joe oughtn't a-started off on Friday. It's the unluckies' day.

"Ask Pete how's the mis'ry in his back, an' then ask for the mare. Tell him sperits 'll ease the mis'ry; he'll be glad to hear that, an' then tell him you-uns 'll call for the mare in the mornin'. We-uns ain't got a dust o' meal above enough for a hoecake for breakfast. Go on, child. I'll have a mouthful for you to eat ginst you gits back, an' the moon 'll rise afore you gits there, bright as day."

Through the twilight, casting grotesque shadows across the white, sandy road, Delia wended her way.

Reaching a trail that branched off into a shorter route to Pete Pennybaker's shop midway the Ridge, she left the road and followed the path through a forest deliciously sweet with the fragrance of wild grape and honeysuckle.

Pennybaker was not a favorite with the people round about. Few had felt regret when he left the town and built his dwelling and shop on the Ridge several miles above Sneedville.

Delia could see his roof and stack chimney as she started, but soon they were lost in the shadows that enshrouded the mountain.

Now and then her path lay along the Clinch, which shone, a waving line of pale color, in the dusky twilight. She could hear the water gurgling against the sharp crags on either bank.

"It sounds lonesome," she said, scarcely knowing she had spoken. A sense of her solitude came over her, and she sighed for Joe. Poor boy! She felt uneasy about him. He was so careless of his good name, though he was never wilfully wicked. He was mischievous and fond of teasing, and from rough men, older than he, whose strength he naturally admired, he had picked up the way of boasting and half-threatening which such men regard as the proper way to assert their prowess.

He was not like these men; but he fancied it was a fine thing to be thought like them.

"If anything were to happen to anybody, they'd be sure to lay the blame of it to Joe," Delia told herself

"for they-uns don't know that his big talk air all brag, an' that he wouldn't harm a hair o' nobody's head for nothin'. He'd 'most die first. He wouldn't hurt a dog, Joe wouldn't. He cried like a child when old Tige got lamed in the sawmill. But then, Joe do set store by Tige — by Tige an' me."

Joe's evil companions had led him into one serious "scrape" lately — the disturbance of a meeting over at Panther Creek. It might have resulted in serious trouble for him if it had not been for the influence of Jerry Tate, the Miller. Jerry knew that thoughtlessness rather than malice had been the cause of the disturbance. The affair had not helped Joe's reputation.

"I do wish he wasn't trampin' over the mount'n this night," said Delia.

As if to cheer and direct her, a great red tongue of flame shot out from the bluff before her. It was a blaze from Pennybaker's blacksmith shop. She watched it, wondering.

"This be a curious time o' day to have the forge het up," she told herself, and hurried forward.

She was still more surprised to find the door of the shop firmly barred within. The light shone brightly enough, however, through the shop's uncovered window. Picking her way through cinders and rubbish she peered through the dusty pane.

From the forge a great blaze was roaring, brilliantly lighting up the interior. The blacksmith was not there; but before the forge knelt an overgrown, awkward boy, intently examining something which he held

in his hand. The light struck full upon his face, sharp, thin, and alive with idiotic delight.

Delia recognized him at once as Ike, Pennybaker's half-witted son, and tapped upon the window-pane to attract his attention. Ike looked up, saw her, and grinned, but made no motion to admit her.

"Open the door, Ike," she called. "Open the door this minute!"

Accustomed to obey only harsh commands, as Delia knew when she ordered him thus, the boy drew away the bar that held the door.

"What air you doin', Ike?"

She suspected he was engaged in some foolish mischief which might endanger the shop.

"Ain't doin' nothin'," said the boy, at the same time thrusting his hands deep into his trousers' pockets, and holding them there.

Delia had been acquainted with the boy all her life, and knew exactly how he was controlled.

"Ike Pennybaker," she said, "take your hands out of your pockets, an' show me what you've got there; else I'll go straight to your daddy an' tell him how you've het up the forge this time o' night, an' likely as not will burn the shop up afore you're done with it. Out with it, I tell you, afore I starts!"

Insanely afraid of his father, the boy drew his hands from his pockets. But before opening them he put his mouth to her ear and whispered:

"Won't you tell if I show 'em to you. Dad 'lowed he'd take the hide off me if I told. He made me steal

'em out o' Joe's coat while it were hangin' up there on the paig. I were tryin' to mold more of 'em like Joe did las' night. There they be."

He opened his hands. They were filled with bullets, slightly oblong and misshapen.

A feeling half of wonder, half of fear, came over Delia. Then she remembered that it was Pete Pennybaker's "fitified boy" who was talking, and she pushed the extended hands aside.

"Stuff!" she said. "You be a bigger idiot than you've got credit for, expectin' folks to b'lieve sech as that. Where's your pappy?"

He pointed toward the cabin. She left him alone with his idiotic fancies, and went to find the surly blacksmith.

The cabin door was slightly ajar. Delia pushed it open, and entered after the manner of the mountain people without knocking.

A man was sitting upon the floor before the kitchen fire cleaning a rifle. An ash cake was smoking in a bed of ashes on the broad hearth, and a few slices of fat bacon lay near.

A smutted, sooty coffee-pot simmered in one corner of the hearth. Clearly, Pete Pennybaker was saving time. He cleaned his gun while waiting for his supper to cook, and was so deeply engrossed that he did not know of Delia's presence until she spoke to him.

"Howdy?" said she.

Pennybaker's old face, scarred and crafty, grew a trifle pale under its coating of soot and cinder. He started nervously, and answered angrily:

"Sakes alive, gal! You come mighty nigh scarin' me to death, creepin' in like a ha'nt. Why n't you come in like white folks, not creep in like a sperit — or a spy?"

"Evil sperits ain't after sech as be rightly minded, Pete Pennybaker," said Delia, "an' if ha'nts air troublin' you-uns, you better be lookin' to your deeds, *I* say. You looked that scared I waited to see you run off when I spoke to you. You reminded me of them as 'flee when no man pursues,' as the Book tells about. That's what you reminded me of."

He scowled and bit his lip, as if attempting to control his anger. After a moment he broke into a laugh.

"You air a reg'lar preacher, Dely," he said. "An' sarsy — I don't know nothin' as sarsy as you be, unless it be that there scalawag brother o' yours. Where is he, anyhow, Dely? I hain't set eyes on Joe for a week."

The clear eyes of the girl looked straight into his restless, evil ones. The imputation that she had come to spy upon him rankled in her heart.

"Joe were here las' night," she said coldly. "You knows it. You knows he made some bullets in your shop, no longer 'n las' night."

The man looked up angrily. "Ike's been tellin' you that?" he said. "Hit's a lie!"

"No, it ain't," said Delia. "Joe told me his own self; an' Joe don't tell lies."

Again old Pennybaker broke into a laugh.

"So," he declared. "I plumb furgot it. You're a sharp one, Dely; an' I do say you air too sprightly

a gal to spend yer days in Powell's Valley. Dely, yer an' yer granny better pack yer duds an' go 'long o' Ike an' me to Texas. I have axed yer grandmaw four times to marry me, an' go 'long o' me. Four times; an' she always 'lows one man air enough for her to bury."

"Be you goin' to Texas soon?" Delia asked.

"Soon's I can raise the money."

He had risen and set the rifle away while he looked at Delia and spoke.

"I tell you, child, there ain't no money in this country. It all goes by in the mail-bags. The mail-bags air the only money-bags that crosses these mountains."

She inquired after the "misery," suggested the remedy, and asked for the mare.

"Lor, child, you cayn't have the mare," he began. "She'll be plumb fagged out 'ginst — wait! Lemme see, now. It ain't far to the mill, an' no meal for Sunday air onhandy. You can have the mare 'bout nine o'clock, Dely; but be sure you don't go out'n a walk. She's mighty nigh wind-broke now, that mare is."

Delia went back into the fragrant forest. The moon was now well risen, and the short walk to the foot of the Ridge shimmered with patches of silver, as the moonlight stole through the restless leaves overhead.

She was not afraid. She was accustomed to lonely walks, and to her the mountain was the safest place in the world. Yet she was uneasy with a premonition of some evil about to happen to Joe; and her fears were intensified by Pete Pennybaker's queer behavior, and Ike's talk.

More than once Delia glanced behind her, with an impression that something was following her—something noiseless, more like a shadow, she thought, than a human being.

And indeed she was followed. Something dark rose up suddenly from the roadside and sprang upon her with a growl of triumph. Something heavy lay upon her shoulders; and across her cheek a hot, panting breath was sweeping. She screamed, but next instant she understood.

"Tige! Dear, dear old Tige! Do you know Joe has gone, old boy? Gone for good?"

She did not at the moment consider how it was the dog had come to seek her there in the road. She did not know that Joe had fastened Tige in the boiler-room of Tate's mill, so that he might not follow his young master. Nor did she understand that the poor beast had escaped and was bound for the cabin under the Ridge, where he had often found his master.

Granny Duffy was waiting for Delia at the cabin door. The old woman screamed when, as her granddaughter opened the little yard gate, a screech-owl sang from a tree near by.

"Turn yer wris'bands wrong side out, child, quick!" said granny. "A screech-owl so clost brings orful luck. Somethin's goin' to happen; somethin' dreadful, I reckin. An' I wouldn't be one bit surprised if Joe ware killed afore he ever gits back to Powell's Valley again."

Poor Delia! The signs and forebodings of her

grandmother, though she did not believe in them, increased her nervous uneasiness about her brother. For the first time in her life she felt afraid to dwell in the lonely little cabin, with no other habitation nearer than surly old Pennybaker's. She was glad the dog had come.

She called to Tige and tried to coax him to lie down before the cabin door when she was ready to go to bed. But Tige refused, and ran hither and thither, in the house and out, snuffing among boxes and barrels, vainly endeavoring to find his master.

When at last Delia saw him leap the fence and go hurrying down the road with his nose to the ground, she burst into tears and closed the cabin door.

"He's gone to find Joe — poor Joe!" she sobbed.

She crept softly to bed beside her grandmother, but she could not sleep. At midnight the moon was still shining. The air was still, and her quick ear caught the sound of horse's hoofs coming down the road. She drew back into the cabin, closed the door, and peered out at the midnight rider through the little window.

As he drew nearer she recognized both horse and rider.

"Ike Pennybaker air up to some mischief, I'll be bound," she muttered. "An' I lay his daddy don't know he's gallopin' over these mount'ns with that mare at this time o' night. No wonder she's wind-broke."

At that moment her grandmother stirred in her sleep and muttered:

"A bad sign; a mighty bad sign if a dog howls outside the door at night. Sure death — sure sign!"

Delia was no believer in omens, but the next morning a cold fear lay upon her heart, and a horrible dread struck her with dumbness when a messenger came galloping up on a bay horse, and went on again, pausing just long enough to call out that Bill Nichols had been shot dead while crossing the Clinch River at the ford at sunrise.

"Shot from ambush," cried the galloping man. "I'm sheriff and coroner down to Sneedville."

CHAPTER III.

A TELLING DOCUMENT.

JOE reached Jerry Tate's cabin on the Clinch River at about ten o'clock at night. The miller made him welcome and stowed him away in the roof-room, after telling him that the family would breakfast by candle-light.

"That suits me mighty well, Mr. Tate," said Joe. "I've got to meet Bill Nichols afore he passes here in the mornin', an' I reckon I'll have to be stirrin' airly if I do that."

"Fixed up your grudge aginst Bill yit?" asked the miller, as he set the tallow dip into the mouth of a broken bottle.

"No, Mr. Tate," said Joe. "I ain't settled it yit. But I aims to — I aims to. I didn't have no gun that other time. I lay Bill wouldn't invite me to the court-house this time; not for nothin'. I ain't no coward, Mr. Tate."

The miller laughed, somewhat scornfully.

"You're a right powerful talker, Joe Hickey," he said. "But that jaw o' yourn will land you in the county jail some o' these days, if you don't larn to wag

it less. You ain't got no business goin' off till you larn to talk less."

Joe was sullenly silent.

"An' I tell you, Joe," Tate went on, "you'd better give it up, this Lone Mountain foolishness, an' stay here 'long o' me. I'll give you a steady job, an' board and keep, an' ten dollars a month for a year. I need a good hand, an' I'm ready to close up with you. Jim 'lows you're a clever, honest hand, no shirk, an' no fault in you exceptin' a little mischievousness an' brag. What do you say to stayin'?"

"Tell you in the mornin'," said Joe sleepily, and the miller went down. He hoped that his offer would be accepted, for he wished well to Joe.

Day dawned on the mountain. The dew, touched with the sun's first rays, hung in iridescent drops from hawthorn and holly when Joe neared the ford on the Clinch.

He had left Jerry Tate's only a few minutes before. As he reached the river it had occurred to Joe that, by climbing the bluff, he might obtain a view of Powell's Valley. But the mists still hung heavily upon the lower world. The valley was only a white haze.

"Powell's Valley ain't awake yit," he said, and turned to descend again to the "big road," his rifle resting idly upon his shoulder, his thoughts with the sister, whose love, he knew, would follow him all that lonely journey.

Lonely! There was not a sound except the noise of his own footsteps, and the soft splash of the Clinch flowing on to the Tennessee.

"'POWELL'S VALLEY AIN'T AWAKE YIT.'"

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"My, how still it air!" exclaimed Joe. Impulsively he lifted his rifle and fired into the air.

"Just to raise a rumpus," he laughed; not dreaming of the "rumpus" that one careless shot was destined to create.

At the foot of the bluff Joe halted. There his road turned, and there, if he delivered the letter entrusted to his care, he must wait for Bill Nichols, the mail-carrier. Bill, to reach a little post-office on the Lone Mountain Route, was compelled to leave the main road and make a circuit of five miles, returning to the main road at the Clinch River ford.

"Why ain't you on time, I'd like to know, Bill Nichols?" muttered Joe, fingering Delia's letter. "You ain't fittin' to git letters nohow, an' I've a good mind not to give it to you."

He stood upon a slight rise where the river makes a "horseshoe" in its course. The road followed this semicircular bend around the higher ground. A narrow foot-path made a shorter route to the ford.

Joe came down the foot-path, intending to meet the carrier at the crossing, deliver the letter and pass on.

As he held the letter in his hand the sight of it seemed to arouse his revengeful feeling toward Nichols. Joe had no thought of reading it. The sense of honor which respects a seal was not wanting in the mountain lad.

He stood toying with the envelope, unconscious that his rough fingers had loosened the seal after so rubbing the overlapping edge that it looked as though intentionally opened.

At that moment he heard a horse coming at a mad gallop down the road beyond the creek — coming nearer and faster, as if death itself followed at the flying heels.

Then a rifle rang out sharp and clear among the crags, followed by one wild halloo. There was a splashing of water, a break in the tangled ivy jungles that bordered the river bank. Then a riderless horse rushed frantically down the steep, broke the hindering brush, cleared the obstructing gorges, and disappeared up the road.

All this had taken place so quickly that Joe, for a moment, did not comprehend that a tragedy had been enacted. When at length his senses returned, he said, "Some one's hurt!" and started at once toward the scene.

He took two steps, and then paused and pondered.

"Might git a taste of lead myself," he said. But he put his hands to his mouth and hallooed three times. There was no response. The mountain was as still, as peaceful as before.

He stooped, and with his forefinger superstitiously made a cross in the sand. Then he turned and rapidly retraced his steps to Jerry Tate's cabin, where he had spent the night.

The family were still at breakfast when, white and trembling, Joe stumbled into the kitchen.

"Mr. Tate," he cried, "come quick for mercy's sake! Some one's hurt, some one's hurt at the ford — some one's killed!"

He dropped into a chair and groaned. The rifle, with ball missing, was in one of his hands, the letter with the broken seal in the other.

Jerry Tate rose at once. He despatched his son Dave after Squire Neely, the nearest justice, and called to Joe to go with him back to the ford.

"I can't," groaned Joe. "Don't ask me. Oh, I can't go back there!"

The recollection of the cry for help, the sight of the riderless steed, the feeling that death was indeed in the bush, were too awful. Joe dropped his face upon his arm and shuddered.

"Why, Joe," said Jerry Tate, "are you a baby? Maybe the man ain't dead nohow, an' needs help from we-uns."

"I tell you he is dead, Mr. Tate," said Joe. "I tell you there's a dead man lyin' at the Clinch ford, an' it's Bill Nichols. I see —" He lifted his white, scared face. "It ware orful — orful!"

Jerry Tate took Joe by the arm and led him away from the cabin, back to the ford where the dead man lay, his face hidden in the ivy jungles near which he had fallen.

It was indeed Bill Nichols. His handsome, boyish face, turned skyward, seemed to smile when the sunlight touched it through the parted bushes, and his hands, stiff and cold, closed fast upon his trust, the mail-bag.

Among the first to reach the scene was Pete Pennybaker. Such news spreads rapidly, even in the mountains.

"I ware going over to holp 'long o' the log-rollin' at your house, Jerry," so he explained his early appearance. "I heard as you-uns aimed to have one today."

The coroner was sent for, and quickly summoned a jury; and at noon a verdict was rendered declaring that William Nichols had come to his death from a shot in the back, and that "said shot was fired from a rifle in the hands of Joseph Hickey."

Joe turned white when he heard this, but with rage rather than fear. He had not once dreamed of such a suspicion when, after his first surprise had subsided, he moved about among the people, telling how he had heard the shot and the cry for hèlp, and had seen the horse go flying up the road, "more like a spirit nor a beast."

His testimony had been taken by the coroner, and he had no idea that the sharp questions which were addressed to him proceeded from a belief that he had fired the fatal shot.

"How could I 'a' done it?" he broke out, fiercely. "Bill were shot from behind, an' I ware right up there t'other side the river, wait'n' for Bill to come over. Right up there — my mark air there this blessed minute as I made when I turned back to go for Jerry."

"Tain't settled yit as you hadn't already crossed over, Joe," said Pennybaker, "an' were hid in the brush on t'other side. It could 'a' been, you know!"

Joe was beside himself. Pennybaker's taunts infuriated him. He advanced threateningly; but hands were placed firmly on his arms, and in a moment the rifle

was wrenched from Joe's hands. In spite of his struggles he was a prisoner.

He burst out into a loud denunciation of Pennybaker, who he felt was his chief accuser.

"Better keep still, Joe," said Jerry Tate, "an' hold your tongue. If you air innocent, nothin' will come of it. An' if you're guilty, threatenin' and strugglin' won't help you none. *I* believes you air innocent."

Jerry's expressed faith in Joe's innocence was not without an effect upon the crowd.

"Joe ain't got no call to be killin' nobody," said one. "Joe ain't got no grudge against Bill Nichols."

"Sarch him an' see," said Pennybaker. "Sarch him an' see! Circumstances air against him, but he might be innocent, you know."

They found on Joe a red cotton handkerchief, a lunch of broiled bacon and cold corn bread, a handful of misshapen bullets, and a crumpled and soiled letter with broken seal, and addressed to "William Nichols, the mail-rider."

"O Dely, Dely!" cried poor Joe.

That fatal letter! It might prove a death-warrant, after all. Who could tell?

They drew it out and read it — Delia's poor little letter:

MR. NICKELS.— Maybe you-uns herd that Joe has been talking what he'd do to you, but he don't mean any harm. His talk ain't no more than some of Joe's big brag.

He will give you this here letter for my sake, 'cause he said as how he would, spite of all his threats; and then if you speak to him kind of good-natured about it, his grudge will sort of get wore

off. We-uns know you only done your duty in taking him up over to Panther Creek.

I ast him to carry this letter so as you and him could part friendly 'fore he goes away to Lone Mountain. And then after that if you sort of keep away from him a while over there, he will sort of forgit it. Yours respectfully,

DELIA HICKEY.

This, then, was the letter she had sent — poor, timid, careful sister, who knew the carrier well enough to know that her confidence would have been safe in his keeping.

Now death had made of the otherwise harmless letter, perchance, a piece of evidence which would convict him of an awful crime.

It proved very interesting reading to the group on the river bank, for all the neighborhood had assembled there, together with the squire, the coroner and the constable.

It was the constable who read the letter while the others clustered about him. Joe was left sitting a little apart from his captors while the officer "puzzled out" the little crooked letters, to which so crooked a meaning might be attached by grand and petit juries.

The mystery of the murder, the complication of circumstances that accused him, the remembrance that many had heard his silly threats against Bill Nichols, the innuendoes of Pennybaker, the looks of horror with which most of the crowd regarded him, all frightened and bewildered Joe.

He felt sure the verdict of the coroner's jury would hang him if Bill had so many friends! Bill was a

church-member. The church would take it up. And he was a mail-carrier, too; the government would be sure to seek vengeance, Joe thought.

What chance was there for him? Who would believe his lame story, and that, too, when his own sister's act condemned him? He could never get justice in Hancock County, never! He knew the attorney-general; a hard man, they said. He must die; and Delia? What would become of her? It would kill Delia.

He glanced at the men busy over the letter. He heard the words, "A mighty tellin' document."

"A mighty tellin' documint," repeated the constable, folding the letter again.

"A *hangin'* documint," wheezed Pete Pennybaker.

"Jest a gal's foolish narvousness!" said friendly Jerry Tate. "Joe wouldn't harm a cat. Nor a yaller dog, neither."

"Waal, he'll have to go 'long o' me to Sneedville till that's proved," said the officer.

"Come 'long — les' don't have no trouble 'bout'n it."

The constable turned to where he had seen Joe standing, bewildered and defiant, a moment before.

The place was vacant. Joe had vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

SURRENDER.

THE circumstantial evidence was, indeed, strong against Joe Hickey. The bullet, a misshapen piece of lead, had been extracted. It precisely fitted the empty chamber of Joe's rifle. Then Delia's letter, and Joe's flight and his having told Jerry Tate that Bill Nichols had been shot, all of these facts combined to make a chain of evidence "stronger than a heap o' men had been hung on," Pete Pennybaker said.

There were, perhaps, but two who believed in the boy's innocence — Delia and Jerry Tate.

Jerry's confidence in Joe survived against his own reasoning. He felt that Joe's bragging talk in his kitchen the night before the tragedy, when he had declared his intention of settling his grudge against the carrier, was almost enough to convict him; but on the other hand, Jerry argued, no one meditating murder would have so created evidence against himself.

"I do wish Joe hadn't run away," Jerry said. "That looks ugly — it looks guilty. Innocent folks ain't afeard to face their deeds. But Lor! Joe ain't nothin' but a boy,— scarcely twenty,— an' he ware

scared to death, to boot. It'll most kill Dely; she set lots o' store by Joe. Poor Dely!"

"He didn't do it!" Delia had declared, when Pennybaker stopped to tell the story of the murder, the arrest and the escape. "Joe didn't do it! I know he didn't. An' I can't for the life of me see what he run away for. I wish he hadn't done that — I do wish Joe hadn't run!"

She bewailed this foolish act of Joe's many times during the day, as she moved, tearful and miserable, about the cabin.

"If I knowed where to find him I'd go an' fetch him to Sneedville my own se'f," she declared. "I'd go an' fetch him my own se'f."

"'Twas your book-larnin', Dely, as done it all!" said granny. "I warned you when you ware trompin' over to the parson's wife's house as it would fetch you nothin' but trouble. An' now you have writ the rope for to hang your brother by your foolishness."

As if she had not thought of it all day, poor, miserable Delia!

"An' I'll be boun'," granny went on, "that Joe forgot to make a cross mark when he turned back to Tate's. It's bad luck to turn back."

"If I could just find him," said Delia, "an' make him come to his trial; if I just could!"

Something brushed her knees as she sat with her face buried in her hands, weeping and miserable. Then a warm tongue licked her hand, and a shaggy head brushed her knees a second time. She started up with a great cry of joy.

"Tige! dear old dog! Have you come from Joe?"

It was something to have even his dog near. She rose and brought food, but Tige refused to eat. He hung about her and whined a plea that she at last understood.

Delia dashed into the cabin, seized a shawl that hung upon the bedpost and ran out again where the dog still stood, whimpering his expectation. She opened the little gate and called to him:

"Come, Tige!" With a bound he was at her side. "On, sir, quick! to Joe!"

The faithful old dog started off briskly down the moonlit road, followed by Delia, who tried in vain to keep up with him.

When Joe slipped into the ivy bordering the roadside, at the inquest into the manner of Nichols' death, he had but scant hope of making good his escape. He crept for a hundred yards beyond the place, still keeping close to the road. Where it makes a semicircular curve he stole across it to a point almost opposite that from which he had made his escape.

There he crept into the hollow trunk of an old oak and waited until the crowd had dispersed, some pursuing him, and others carrying the body of the dead mail-carrier to Sneedville.

All day he sat there. Benumbed by his cramped position, he was truly thankful when at last darkness fell upon the mountain. Then he crept out from his hiding-place and lay stretched upon the ground, trying to think what he ought to do.

Go back to Jerry's? He was afraid. The constables would be sure to look for him there. Go to Delia? That meant to go to jail. And go to jail he would not — he would die first. He was boasting to himself in his customary manner. The man who tried to take him would do well to look to his weapons!

There was a sound of somebody stealthily advancing among the undergrowth. Muffled feet, thought Joe, and turned to flee. He had quite forgotten his intention to fight all comers. On, on, through the thicket, over gorge and boulder! Joe's hands were torn, his face scratched and bleeding, but on he went until, away up the mountain, he saw in the dim light two horsemen pass out of sight.

He dropped to the earth, almost fearing the beating of his heart would betray him to the riders. They were seeking him; he knew it. Was all his life to be like this? As well go back, even if it were to be hung, and done with it.

Hung? No — he would stand and be shot first. But why should they put him to death?

"I ain't done nothin' nohow," he declared. "I have the right to live, an' I *will* live."

But how he regretted the thoughtless pranks, the mischievous meddling, and the foolish boast that had conspired to brand him as a "bad character!" If he had only a good name to recommend him! But he knew there was not one who could unreservedly speak well of him. And now —

Again there came a muffled sound of footsteps, a

faint, hurried breathing, a halloo, distant but immediately answered, as if his pursuers were hailing each other. He arose again to fly, but something sprang at him with a familiar, shrill bark of delight.

"Tige! old Tige! down, sir! Hush! be still — down, sir, I say!"

They went down together, Joe holding the dog's mouth to stifle his joyous barking. He believed that the constables were tracking him with his dog!

For an hour Joe and Tige lay together. The boy's hand was upon the dog's head, ready to stifle the first sound he might utter. Now and then the halloo was repeated. At each call the dog started up with an attempt to bark.

Poor Tige! How many times he had been made to hunt for Delia or Joe in play! Evidently thinking this but another of the old games of hide-and-seek, he was leading the pursuers to the runaway.

Joe knew he could not lie there safely. He must get out of Hancock County — out of Tennessee. He had an uncle across the line, in Virginia, who had once offered him a home. Perhaps he could reach his uncle, and remain at his house until the excitement blew over, or Nichols' real murderer should be discovered.

But the dog — he could never make the journey with Tige at his heels, trying all the time to get away and disclose his hiding-place. There was but one thing to do.

Joe thrust his hand into his pocket, and drew out

his knife. It was a large, strong-bladed, new, sharp pocket-knife.

As Joe opened the longest blade, the dog looked up into his face with affectionate eyes, crept closer, and licked his hand — the hand that held the knife.

It dropped to the ground. Joe buried his face in Tige's woolly coat.

"I can't do it!" he groaned. "I believe I'd sooner 'a' killed Bill Nichols, and I wouldn't never 'a' done that! I can't hurt old Tige!"

Again the halloo sounded, nearer and clearer. Again the dog started up, and again Joe threw himself upon him, his hands on his throat to stifle the telltale bark. Again the dog struggled, and again the knife was lifted.

"I have to!" said Joe. "I have to, Tige! I'd ruther die as to do it." He felt for the dog's soft throat. "I'd ruther die —"

Tige sprang back, released his throat, came forward again, thrust his cold muzzle into Joe's face and licked it.

"I'd ruther die," repeated Joe. "Yes — and I will die ruther'n do it!" he ended, impulsively, and flung his knife to the ground.

"Go, old boy! I'll risk the chances," said Joe. "Go an' lead 'em to me if you're mind to. I ain't got the heart to kill a friend like *you*. Go!"

The dog sprang past him, and disappeared in the darkness. Joe heard the splash when Tige struck the water, to swim the Clinch. The boy lay weary and

helpless, calculating how long it would take his dog to reach Sneedville and put the pursuers again upon his trail.

He fell asleep over the calculation, and for a season forgot his troubles and his desolate condition. In his dreams he was a boy again, wandering through the valley with Delia, or scaling the bluffs about Clinch mountain and the Ridge. And always Delia was by his side, and old Tige followed at their heels.

He awoke with a start, to find the moon shining brightly down upon his covert, and the dream, as it seemed, still going on; for there in the moonlight stood Delia, and at her side old Tige, friskily pursuing the old game of hide-and-seek.

"Tige fetched me here to help you in your trouble," said Delia, with that calm manner which to Joe, in his extremity, seemed particularly comforting. It denoted strength.

In his weakness and desolation it was very good to feel that some one brought him strength and counsel. Blessed indeed seemed the calm accents of his sister.

"Tige fetched me to you, Joe. I can't for the life of me see what you're a-running off for. 'Pears like you might 'a' done somethin' you're afeard to face, or else ashamed on. If you're not guilty, Joe, you're behavin' more like a foolish boy than you air like a man turned twenty years old."

Not a tear, not a tremor; no accusation nor suspicion; only reproach for the cowardice of flying from a false charge.

He saw how foolish he had been, how weak, fearful and imprudent in running away. Cowardice always resembles guilt.

He felt how much he had injured his cause by his rash temper and his panic; but what to do? It was not left for him to decide.

"Get right up from there, Joe, and go down to Sneedville an' give yourse'f up to the authorities. This minute; right now! Take the nigh cut through the Holler — nobody'll be sarchin' for you that nigh home.

"Go right to the jailer, an' tomorrer send for Lawyer Tyler, an' tell him the whole, plain truth, sparin' nothin'. There ain't never no call to be afeared o' the truth, even if it do seem ag'inst you. Go right on. I'll be there tomorrer."

But Tige seemed disposed to go to jail with his master, for when, two hours later, the jailer opened his door to a footsore and weary traveler, asking the unusual privilege of occupying a cell in his establishment, a lame Newfoundland dog limped in also.

"Joe Hickey, as I'm alive!" exclaimed the jailer. "Why, Joe, they're scourin' the county for you. Who arrested you, son?"

Joe smiled, and patted Tige's head.

"I reckon 'twere Dely as done it, Mr. Hyson," he said.

"Wal, jest step in here an' git a bite o' cold victuals. I'm human, if I am a jail-keeper. An' I've knowed you a long time, Joe. A man as comes an' gives him-

se'f up ain't the man to sneak off from them that's trustin' of 'im."

He threw open the kitchen door as he spoke, for the dwelling and jail were under one roof, and motioned Joe to enter.

"I ain't hungry now, Mr. Hyson, an' I couldn't eat." This was true, for poor Joe felt something rise in his throat at the unexpected kindness and choke him. "I couldn't eat, but if you'll give the dog a bite, I'll be thankful to you."

When Tige had finished his supper and lay sleeping beside his master in the miserable little cell, both sleeping soundly, the jailer put out his light and crept again to bed, muttering the while:

"The man as thinks of a hungry dog an' sleeps like a little tired child ain't the man to put a bullet in another's back, he ain't. An' that sister o' his — wall, I've heard tell of her grit an' hard sense,— horse sense, they says,— an' I lay she have got it, grit an' sense, too. But it do appear to me as she have sent Joe back to a mighty hot place."

So she thought, too, poor Delia, as she lay sobbing upon her pillow after her weary tramp "If he air guilty he'll be hung," she said. "If he air *not* guilty, goin' back'll cl'ar him. But if he air guilty — oh, if he air guilty!"

CHAPTER V.

"CONSCIENCE MAKES COWARDS."

WET with dew and shivering from her long exposure to the mountain night, Delia reached her grandmother's cabin at dawn. On the following morning, while Joe slept the sound sleep of innocence in jail, his sister lay racked by physical sufferings that Granny Duffy's simple remedies could not relieve. Rheumatism, the common enemy of the mountaineers, had seized the brave girl.

For a week Delia was unable to leave the cabin. When the day of Joe's trial arrived she was still incapable of walking with ease. The distance to Sneedville, the county-seat, was six miles, and it looked as if Joe might not have the benefit of his sister's appearance before the jury.

Delia had sent, regularly, messages of good cheer to the poor fellow. These were for the most part entrusted to Pete Pennybaker, whose old gray mare passed every day, bearing her owner "to court."

Court in those districts affords a series of free entertainments which no mountaineer willingly misses. Pete had kept Delia informed as to Joe's prospects.

"Mighty scant; mighty scant!" he told her. "Though Joe have got a good lawyer, Lawyer Tyler. They say as the jailer have took mightily to Joe, 'count o' his givin' hisself up, an' have told the 'torney giner'l how the boy tried to kill his dog an' couldn't, bein' too tender-hearted, an' sech. But Lor, Mr. Rich'son ain't keerin' for that. All he keers for air to hang folks; an' I lay he'll do his duty by Joe."

"Air you-uns goin' to town tomorrer?" asked Delia.

"In course, child. I'm watchin' that rope tight'nin' round Joe Hickey's neck, *I* am."

She glanced up at him with swift anger, and in an instant the blacksmith remembered what he was saying. He broke into a coarse laugh.

"I ware jokin' of you, child. I ain't got nothin' 'ginst yer brother. You come over tomorrer evenin' an' I'll give you all the news 'bout poor Joe. You be sure to come, Dely, for I ain't comin' back this way, I've got to go by the Holler on business."

Delia's confidence in the blacksmith had long been ebbing. That coarse laugh and heartless jeer made her question if he had ever been a friend to her brother. She doubted if he had delivered her harmless messages.

That night she lay long awake, watching the stars through the cabin window, fancying poor Joe uncomforted by her words of good cheer, and wondering if he could see the shining stars from his cell in the county jail.

By morning her longing to see Pete had become

overpowering. She rose early and limped over to Pete's to beg that he would take her with him to court.

The blacksmith was in the act of starting when Delia, laying hold of his bridle, asked to be allowed to ride behind him to Sneedville, as she particularly wanted to see Joe's lawyer.

Pennybaker's dark face changed to livid, but whether with fear or wrath Delia could not tell. He lifted his keen switch as if he would have struck at the girl's face, lifted so pleadingly to his own.

"No, you can't go to town," he shouted. "You're a born fool to think of it. What have you got to tell Lawyer Tyler, anyhow? You'd better hold your tongue afore you get your brother into any more trouble, *I* tell you. Let go my bridle; do you hear?"

Delia's eyes did not leave his for an instant; her hand closed tighter on his bridle-reins; without speaking she gazed at him, he thought, as if striving to search his very soul. The coward trembled.

"Lor, Dely," he said, affecting merriment, "you air aggervatin' to a man as ain't used to dealin' with women-folks. Git away, child! I ain't aimin' to fault you-uns, but I ain't got no great sight o' patience. You can't go, honey, nohow; for the mare don't tote double."

That settled it. She let go her hold upon the bridle, and stood with hands clasped hopelessly, watching him ride away through the early morning mist. She was so helpless! Yet what good would her going

do? What did she know that would benefit the prisoner?

She turned again with heavy heart toward the cabin under the Ridge, when Ike, the half-witted boy, came down the path from the house. Delia waited for him, and told him that some one was at the shop waiting to get a shoe for his horse.

"Let 'im wait," said Ike.

"I ain't hinderin' of him," said the girl. She would have passed on, but Ike squared himself in the path and began to talk.

"Say, Dely," he said confidentially, "there wa'n't no money, after all, ware there?"

"Where?"

"Where?" said Ike. "In the mail-bag."

Instantly a strong comprehension of the truth flashed upon the girl's mind. She was almost afraid to speak, lest she should frighten the boy into silence.

"There wa'n't much, I reckon." The words were quiet, the tone natural; but she could feel her heart beat. "Did you aim to find much?"

"*He* 'lowed to," said Ike. "*I* never keered for Texas, nohow."

Deftly her mind was putting together the bits of evidence. Why had Ike stolen the oblong bullets that Joe had molded for his own old rifle? Why had the blacksmith been so scared and angry when she came upon him while he was cleaning his gun? Why had he paled when she asked to be taken to the lawyer? The contemplated trip to Texas, Ike's mid-

night ride across the mountain, now had a distinct meaning to her.

It was Ike who was the murderer! Pete Pennybaker had made the irresponsible idiot the chief culprit! Delia could only restrain her desire to scream her knowledge in the boy's ears by remembering that such a course would bar her surmises from confirmation. She controlled herself.

"Ike," she said, "now wa'n't you a fool to hope to find money enough to git to Texas on, in a little county mail-bag?

"'Tware Mobry's money," said Ike; "Mobry's money he ware sendin' off for goods. Five hundred dollars! Joe told we-uns about it while he ware moldin' them ugly-lookin' bullets at we-uns' shop. But 'twa'n't there. Mobry didn't send it that day as he aimed, I reckin. Leastways there weren't nothin', nothin' at all in the bag that Bill was clutchin' so tight. Afore we-uns could search round him t'others was comin', an' so *I* sneaked it off a back trail to ole Sally, the mare, an' he went on to jine the inquest."

Quietly and adroitly she drew the story out of him. He had gone the night before and hidden himself, with the blacksmith's help, at a point near where Joe would, in all probability, meet the carrier. Ike had afterward taken the little obscure trail, the same Joe had traveled by Delia's direction, back to the county-seat, and thence to his father's cabin on the Ridge.

Delia drew it all carefully from him, and then as carefully cautioned him not to tell his father he had

told. She was about to leave him, when the idiot again barred the way.

"You won't tell, will you, Dely?" he asked, piteously. "You won't tell him I told you?"

"Not I," said Delia; "an' he'll whip you awful if he finds out you have told, Ike."

"I knows it," whimpered Ike; "I knows it."

He had never, in all his benighted existence, before disobeyed a command of his terrible parent. The father knew this. He did not depend upon Ike's wit to keep the murder a secret, but upon his terror of him, his father.

To get word to Lawyer Tyler — that was the thought uppermost in Delia's mind when she turned away toward her grandmother's cabin. To walk to him herself was impossible; she could not have walked the half-mile to Pennybaker's without the aid of her grandmother's cane. And there was no one to send; no one believed in Joe's innocence except Jerry Tate, and he lived miles away on the mountains.

Dismayed by fear that her brother would be declared guilty before she could reveal her terrible secret to the court, she sat by the roadside and burst into tears. She did not hear the sound of approaching hoofs, and started with alarm when some one called her name:

"What's the matter, Dely?"

It was the Widow Biles' boys. They had stopped at the shop for a horseshoe, and had overtaken her upon the road.

DELIA'S DISMAY.

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"Where air you-uns goin' to, Jeems?" A hope to get the horse the children were riding had arisen in her heart.

"Goin' to town," said the boy, "an' to Tate's mill."

"Jeems," said Delia, "I'll give you that there white pig o' mine if you-uns'll let me have the horse today; an' I'll fetch your turn to the mill for you, too."

The boy shook his head. He wanted "to go to town his own se'f."

A "dominicker rooster," a squirrel, and finally a Noah's ark, the one souvenir of her childhood, were added to her bid.

It was useless. The boy would not be bought, and three persons and a bag of corn could not all ride one horse at one time.

Would he carry a letter to Mr. Tate, if she gave him the pig?

"Gimme the dominick an' ark, too?" The widow's son was a trader.

Yes, she would have given all her little store of worldly possessions — her life itself, if necessary — to get a message to her brother's friend. The boys agreed to wait while she mounted the horse and rode home to write the letter.

As she felt herself safe upon the animal's back, and turned his head toward the cabin, how glad, how inexpressibly thankful, she was for the precious art of writing letters, which but a few days before she had almost believed to be a curse!

It was only a crumpled, half-printed, half-written

little letter, but honest old Jerry Tate would understand. Delia felt safe when she had tucked the letter into Jim Biles' hat.

"You-uns must fetch it to Mr. Tate his own se'f," she said. "Nobody else air to tetch it, or else you'll never get the pig an' other truck."

She was almost jubilant as the horse trotted off toward Sneedville. Yet when evening came on she began to fear what Pennybaker might do if Ike should confess that he had told her! She trembled to think of being alone on the lonely Ridge with nobody in call but the Pennybakers.

She dreaded to go after "the news" he had promised, yet she was afraid not to go lest her absence should excite the man's suspicion. She had never played the hypocrite in her life, and if the guilty blacksmith were to say a word against Joe, she felt that it would be almost impossible to refrain from branding him as a murderer then and there.

But to stay away was not to be thought of. If he suspected her, how long would he leave her in safety? And if she were murdered, who would save Joe's neck?

Pennybaker was sitting on the door-step as she came up, leaning heavily upon her cane, weary and still agonized with rheumatism.

"Waal, Dely," said the blacksmith, "there ain't much new. The evidence ain't all in yit, but sech as be in don't arger much good for Joe. The Tates air about the only supporters Joe's got. An' Jerry's evi-

dence so fur done more to hurt nor it done to help him. Jerry's to be witness again tomorrer; the 'torney gineral ain't finished with Jerry yit.

"Jerry 'lows, outside court, as a man mean enough to shoot another in the back ware not such a fool as to leave his tracks unkivered, like Joe done. Joe's very blab an' brag ware in his favor, Jerry 'lowed.

"But the jedge wouldn't hear none of his theorizin' — said it wasn't evidence. Told him to tell what he knew, and shet up about what it meant. Said the jury would do the interpretin'.

"Jim Tate had some important testimony, some-un 'lowed, as would come up tomorrer — "

"Thank God!" The involuntary exclamation burst from her lips, for she understood that Jim Tate had comprehended her letter.

Pete watched her slow, crippled gait as she disappeared in the woods. He thought of her queer exclamation, and felt the point of his dirk. He had carried it constantly of late.

"I'm a good mind to!" he muttered.

Long after she had gone he still sat thinking.

"I ought to 'a' done it," he said. "Dead men an' dead women tell no tales, an' the time an' place ware favor'ble, an' the river handy. But sher! what do she know?"

Still, he could not sleep after going to bed. Once he did doze, and dreamed that something heavy lay upon his breast, suffocating him.

When, in his dream, he felt for it, he found it to be

a bag of gold; but when he tried to lift it off, he could not move it. Something held it fast. He called to Joe Hickey to help him, but Joe was dead and buried, and the gold was crushing him.

Again in his dream he tried to lift it, and his hand touched something cold and clammy; a dead man's hand pressing the phantom bag of gold down upon his chest.

Pete Pennybaker awoke with a shriek, got up, dressed himself, and sat in the open cabin door.

After a while the man rose and walked off in the moonlight. Across the Ridge he went, toward the cabin in its shadow. In his right hand he carried the dirk, and in his sin-burdened heart he meditated another murder — a crime that "was necessary," he told himself. "Evil begets evil," and one crime requires fifty to conceal it.

Pennybaker approached the cabin stealthily. Not that stealth was necessary, for it was occupied by two helpless women only. He stood a moment beside the little window, whose shutterless pane seemed to stare at him in the moonlight.

His guilty imagination conjured up all kinds of reminders of Bill Nichols' murder. The gleaming window-pane seemed a shallow pool of water, into which he heard the plunge of a slayer flying from discovery. Then it seemed to be a glazed eye peering at him from an ivy jungle. He saw once more the staring, dead eyes that had looked up into his from the jungle upon the bank of the Clinch.

A dead man's eyes! A shadow drifted across the moonlight as a cloud sailed between him and the moon. He thought some one was coming toward him, and turned quickly to see — nothing.

"A spirit! It air Bill's spirit!" he whispered. With one bound he cleared the low fence, and went hurrying home without so much as a glance behind him.

Away! away! from that awful Something that would henceforth dog his steps forever, heard ceaselessly by the quickened inward ear of conscience.

Within the cabin under the shadow of the Ridge, with their faces pressed against the window-pane watching his flight, stood Delia and her grandmother. Delia's hands were fast clasped about an old rifle which Granny Duffy kept as a memento of her long-dead husband. Suspecting that Pete Pennybaker would steal to the cabin, the two women prepared to sell their lives dearly. "Give it to him, Dely," said granny, "if he comes prowlin' back around here again! Let him know that we-uns is peaceable, but we ain't no cowards!"

This is a creed not uncommon among the rude mountaineers.

CHAPTER VI.

A GOOD SIGN.

THE last pan had been carefully hung in its place upon the kitchen wall. Delia brushed the crumbs from the breakfast-table into her apron, and shook them out to the chickens gathered noisily about the kitchen door. The brood pounced upon them eagerly, and one, the doomed "dominicker," made bold to step into the kitchen door, where he expressed his delight by loud crowing.

"Some one's comin', Dely!" declared granny. "You better pick the pan full o' beans. Some-un's comin'—that ole dominick don't crow for nothin', an' in the house, too."

"I reckon he crowed for victuals that time," said Delia. "An' I'm thinkin' it's about the last crowin' he'll do for we-uns, anyhow. I give him away to Jim Biles yesterday."

"Give the dominick away! Lor, child, how in the world air we-un's to know when it air daylight if you give the dominick away? My! my! how my nose do eech! Some-un's comin' sure's you're born, Dely."

She forgot the dominicker in the coming of the guest toward whom all the "signs" pointed.

Delia knew it was too early for visitors. The sun was not yet risen upon the valley, and would not rise for almost an hour. The peaks of the distant mountains were already aglow, as if capped with silver; but in the valley the mist lay heavy and purple. The valley was not yet astir.

Delia stepped to the door and peered out into the haze. She could scarcely see so far as the little gate, and yet, something *was* coming down the road.

There was a noise of wheels, and of horses' hoofs striking the sandy road with that half-muffled sound which has a kind of mystery about it, and is not altogether pleasant to hear.

Delia watched and listened, until at last the vehicle drew up before the gate. It was a light buggy, drawn by two strong horses. A small, thin man alighted, and came briskly forward toward the open door.

"I am glad to find you up," said the sheriff of Hancock County. "You are to get your bunnet and come with me at once to your brother."

Ten o'clock of a warm morning in Sneedville courtroom! The judge glanced at the octagonal clock set high on the wall opposite his desk on the raised platform.

"Ten o'clock, Mr. Tyler," said the judge, by way of reminding the prisoner's counsel that, even in a case of life or death, justice should not be slow.

Mr. Tyler had his eyes fixed on the door of the room behind the seat of judgment. It opened, and

the sheriff came out alone. As he looked with apparent indifference round the crowded hall, and went on down the aisle, Mr. Tyler leaned toward the judge and said, "Your honor, I will open the defence in five minutes."

"Defence! Mout as well talk of defendin' Judas," said Pete Pennybaker to the man at his right hand. The words went indistinctly into the court-room on the breeze from the window at Pennybaker's back.

"You seem to have a kind o' cool place up there, Mr. Pennybaker. I wish you'd let me get a breath of air beside you," said the sheriff, edging his way through the standing crowd.

The blacksmith, feeling honored by the official's notice, crowded to the right side of the window and made room at his left, assuming an air of importance as he did so.

Attorney-General Richardson had completed his examination of Jerry Tate, and announced that the evidence for the prosecution was all in. He sat down with a conviction that the case against Joe Hickey was clear.

"I shall not speak ten minutes, Tyler," whispered the attorney-general to Joe's counsel.

"I don't suppose you will," replied Mr. Tyler, in a tone that rather mystified his opponent.

"Shall you cross-examine the miller?" The attorney-general indicated by a nod Jerry Tate, who remained in the box.

"No. You can step down, Mr. Tate," said Joe's advocate.

"I were in hopes —" began Jerry.

"Yes, I know. You were in hopes of being asked for testimony to my client's kindness of heart. It would be useless. You can step down."

Lawyer Tyler again looked round on the mountaineers, men and women, young and old, who filled the benches and stood packed in the back part of the aisles between seats. Some fancied he looked round in despair.

"He's give up poor Joe's case," snuffled Pete Pennybaker to the sheriff by his side. "I reckon there wa'n't never clearer evidence. An' there ain't no denyin' thet hangin's too good for him as done a murder like that."

"You're right, Mr. Pennybaker!" said the sheriff, with what struck the blacksmith as a particularly hearty assent.

Indeed, the testimony against Joe had been an unusually complete chain of circumstantial evidence. As the boy listened he felt that he himself, had he been on the jury, would have pronounced a verdict of guilty. He saw so clearly how the tale of his own faults and follies was being woven into a rope for his neck!

His disturbance of the Panther Creek meeting had been testified to; the loudness and frequency of his threats to revenge upon Bill Nichols his arrest for the disturbance were sworn to by Joe's best friends. Their testimony was all the more damaging because they had submitted so unwillingly to its extraction by the prosecution.

In no part of the case had the attorney-general's skill been more profound and less remarked than in his handling of Joe's start for Lone Mountain. He had unaccountably thrown up his place at Jim Tate's mill. He had refused a better place from Jerry Tate, and Jerry could not give any reason why. To the mountaineers it seemed incredible that any boy, still less one of Joe's reputation, should have left an easy job for the sake of seeking another, far away, at higher wages.

Joe had started with no baggage but a rifle, and did that look as if he were going to seek work? The attorney-general had by his questions continued to suggest strongly, what he really believed, that Joe's start for Lone Mountain was nothing but a device for reaching, unsuspected, a place of ambush from which to shoot the mail-carrier.

Why had Joe stopped to meet Bill Nichols? To deliver a letter! Had he delivered it? No; it was found broken open in his pocket. And what did the letter contain? The attorney-general read it in court. It showed that his sister feared he would attack the dead man! Not only so, but part of its contents were of a nature to excite Joe to fury against Nichols.

Jerry Tate's evidence had destroyed the last vestiges of public confidence in poor Joe. Had he not reached the mill with a newly emptied rifle in his hand? Who could believe Joe such a fool as to fire a shot merely to break the morning stillness? That was wholly incredible, because one of Joe's misshapen bullets had been found in the mail-carrier's body.

In vain Mr. Tyler's cross-examination suggested that the bullet might have been fired by some one else than Joe. Who else? No one else had been seen around the fatal place. And would a guiltless boy have shrunk from going to view the body? The miller had related the whole truth, as in duty bound.

To crown all came Joe's flight from arrest. This, the attorney-general continued to signify, was not only proof of a guilty conscience, but Joe's giving himself up was upon a cool calculation that he had better surrender because he saw he could not escape. Thus not only the folly of Joe but the wisdom of Delia was perverted by the trained prosecution.

What Joe comprehended most clearly of all was that his own "blathering" talk, his garrulous threats of revenge, the bad and unjust spirit with which he had regarded Nichols, in a word, his own vices and foolishness, were the distorting and fatal medium through which all in court saw his innocent acts.

He saw how he had long been weaving the strongest strands to choke out his life on the gallows. The gallows! He fancied how he would look down from the gallows on the crowd of old acquaintances come to see him hanged.

Would Delia be there? "O God," the boy prayed in his heart, "deliver me, and spare poor Delia the shame!"

Lawyer Tyler's eyes once more ran over the crowded faces with apparent indifference. Nevertheless they gleamed, Pete Pennybaker thought, for an uncommonly

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long moment on him; and there was an expression on the lawyer's face that terribly touched the blacksmith's guilty soul.

Had the sheriff nodded to Joe's counsel? Pennybaker glanced at the sheriff, and found him looking as inscrutable as before.

Strong gusts of wind blew round Pennybaker's back. They did not prevent a profuse perspiration from starting upon his forehead. Not that he was warm, but he wished to be thought so. Wiping the cold drops from his forehead with a red cotton handkerchief, he said, "It's powerful hot, Mr. Sheriff."

"Joe Hickey don't look like's if he thought so."

"No, it's a cold day for poor Joe. What's the jedge sayin'?"

"He wants to hurry on the case," said the sheriff.

The judge had leaned forward and said, "Mr. Tyler, time is flying. The court is waiting for the defence."

"I will not detain your honor two minutes more," said Mr. Tyler, going into the closed room whence the sheriff had come.

Instantly he returned with Delia.

Pete Pennybaker leaned forward, his hands trembling, his breath coming and going like a frightened hen's. As he stared at Delia, he thought the sheriff's eyes were fixed on him, but the guilty man did not dare to look around at the officer of the law.

Joe was still unconscious of his sister's presence. He sat with his eyes cast down, that he might not again see the looks of horror centred on him from a hundred pairs of eyes.

Delia swiftly glanced around the court-room. What did she know, thought Pennybaker, that gave her that look of triumph and of joy? He half rose.

"Sit down — where — you — are!" said the sheriff emphatically, laying his hand on the blacksmith's arm.

"It's just that I were wantin' to hear better," said the man, sinking back on the sill of the open window.

He had seen at the door two constables who had appeared to move suspiciously as he rose. Pennybaker had not noticed them there before. He felt the breeze at his back, and thought of the great freedom of the mountains from which it blew.

But there could not be anything wrong, Pete thought. Nobody was looking at him. He called himself "too skeery." Delia couldn't know the truth. All the spectators watched her because they were sure her brother would be hanged. It was only to sympathize with Joe that she went limping across before the judge's desk.

"Joe!" said Delia.

"Delia!"

Joe rose. Next moment her arms were round his neck. The constable let her stand beside him in the dock, while Joe fairly broke down and cried.

Delia looked straight at Pete Pennybaker, who thought her eyes blazed. The sheriff had distinctly nodded at Delia.

"I am ready to go on, your honor," said Mr. Tyler.

"Then call a witness," said the judge, somewhat impatiently.

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"I call Isaac Pennybaker."

Isaac Pennybaker! The people could not trust their ears. Men held their breath. There was silence in the court for a moment. Then it was startled by Pete Pennybaker's cry:

"He's fitified! Ike's an idiot! He ain't russponsible! It ain't true!" And the blacksmith tried to move toward the door.

"Sit down!" commanded the sheriff, thrusting out his hand. "Sit down, I say!"

All eyes were on Pennybaker.

"Hold him, Mr. Sheriff," cried Joe's counsel.

"I arrest you for the murder of William Nichols!" said the sheriff. He had not finished the sentence when the court-room was in wild commotion.

Pennybaker, striking the sheriff with all his force and tripping him at the same moment, had jumped from the open window.

"Stop the murderer!" shouted Mr. Tyler.

"Stop the murderer!" shouted the sheriff, picking himself up and jumping out after the criminal.

"Stop the murderer!" yelled the two constables as they ran round the corner of the building.

Pennybaker could hear the roar of the crowd as he fled.

Up the steep street, straight at the hill's summit, the man ran as if he were young again. He ran, expecting every moment to receive a bullet in his back.

Why did the pursuers not shoot? Was he gaining on them? Yes, he heard their voices more and more

faintly. Pennybaker turned his head to look back as he flew.

Then he understood why a volley had not been sent after him. Within seventy-five yards of his heels ran the sheriff.

Pennybaker sped on to the top of the hill. Three hundred yards farther was the deep gorge of Rattlesnake Creek. The flying man ran straight on.

Half-way down the long slope he looked back again. The sheriff was within fifty yards, running easily.

"Stop, Pennybaker!" shouted the sheriff. "Stop! You can't get away. I'm bound to have you alive. If it wasn't for that I'd shoot. Stop! You can't get away."

The blacksmith ran on to the bridge. In the middle of it he waited one instant. The sheriff was so close that the click of his flying feet reached Pennybaker above the thumping of his own beating heart. Pennybaker laid his hand on the railing of the bridge. Up he went with a spring.

Down, down he fell. Five seconds later the sheriff looked over the railing to the stream, one hundred feet below. By ones, twos, threes the foremost runners of the crowd reached the bridge. The sheriff crossed to the lower railing. It was soon lined with faces peering down at what looked like a scarecrow drifting quietly out of sight round a turn, sinking deeper, till it dragged on the pebbles as it went.

"Acquitted by a solid vote, granny," said Joe to his

grandmother, as the three, granny, Delia and Joe, sat under the little porch of the cabin at the foot of the Ridge as the sun set over Powell's Valley. "Not a man went ag'inst me."

He dropped his chin into the palm of one hand, and with the other softly stroked the black face which old Tige rubbed against his knee.

It was over; the doubt and the danger, and the terrible unrest. How delightfully quiet and strangely good seemed the place which he had been so anxious to leave!

"Mr. Tate give me a place in the mill ag'in," he said, after a moment's silence. "An' he has fixed it as we-uns air to live in Ben Lane's house, his foreman as died, an' I air goin' to be foreman in Ben's stead; an' we-uns air all to live there together."

"What'll they do with Ike, Joe?" asked granny, who had not been at Sneedville. "Ike ain't hardly responsible, an' that's a fact."

"Ike's goin' to the asylum for weak-minded folks," said Joe. "All allows Ike air fitified, an' in no ways to blame for doin' as his daddy bid him. Jim Tate testified for Ike, an' 'lowed he'd always been a kind o' part idiot, an' got 'em to send him where he'd be safe, an' keered for."

"Jim Tate air a good man," said Delia; "an' he ain't wantin' in book-larnin' neither. He read that letter I writ him about Joe, an' saved Joe from hangin'. That's what larnin' done for Joe."

"Maybe so," said granny.

"'I SEE IT CL'AR,' SHE SAID;
'THERE'LL BE GOOD LUCK NOW.'"

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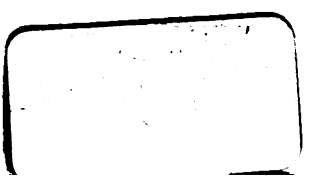
It was hard for her to believe good could come of that which neither clothed, warmed nor fed. She hobbled to the gate and looked up at the sky.

"Joe ought to be more keerful o' the signs," she said. "An' you oughtn't to 'a' fetched the hoe in the house that day, Dely."

"Joe ought to listen to his olders, an' them as air able to advise him," said Delia. "Because a boy don't *have* to do as he air bid, ain't a sign that he don't need advice. An' if he had listened to Mr. Tate, as ware always his friend, there wouldn't 'a' been no trouble. I'm a-countin' more on obedience an' common sense nor I be on signs."

Slowly, up above the ragged boughs of the western cedars the new moon had come into view as the daylight faded. Granny saw it and smiled.

"I see it cl'ar," she said; "there'll be good luck now. I see it cl'ar."

She had watched the signs for threescore years and ten, and it was impossible to turn the old soul from its long established beliefs.

But as for Delia—"I ain't keerin' for signs," she insisted. "A boy air more safe an' better off, too, if he listens to his olders, even if he air turned twenty. It takes more than years to make a man, let Joe remember that. An' it's a mighty good sign when a boy air willin' to be guided by his olders—a mighty good sign."